



The Enlightenment Test

Der Erleuchtungstest

Gerald Virtbauer

Abstract

The Enlightenment Test (ET) is introduced. The ET is a qualitative instrument that enables reflection on mindfulness and meditation and the question of enlightenment from a Buddhist psychological perspective.

Keywords

Buddhism, mindfulness, meditation, enlightenment,

Kurzzusammenfassung

Der Erleuchtungstest wird vorgestellt. Es handelt sich dabei um ein qualitatives Instrument, das Reflexionen zu Achtsamkeit, Meditation und der Frage der Erleuchtung von einer buddhistisch psychologischen Perspektive ermöglicht.

Schlüsselwörter

Achtsamkeit, Buddhismus, Erleuchtung, Meditation

The Enlightenment Test

The question of enlightenment is of no great and direct relevance in the psychotherapeutic and health- and clinical-psychological applications of mindfulness meditation. However, even if one works on psychologically applying mindfulness outside of the traditional religious contexts, the question of enlightenment practically plays a role in the field, given that enlightenment is the ultimate goal of mindfulness practice with its roots in Indian religion (particularly in early [Pali] Buddhism). Considering discussions about this topic in class, as well as the increasing quantitative research on questions of enlightenment, I introduce a qualitative psychological anthropological instrument, the Enlightenment Test (ET). The reader may soon find out that I am not the developer of the ET. I suggest a certain point of view, based on a variety of Buddhist *Sutta* (relating to the Buddha's discourses) and *Abhidhamma* (relating to the "higher" Buddhist psychological teachings) perspectives that are elaborated in detail in the Pali literature. This point of view is helpful to reflect on mindfulness and its ultimate goal. The ET can be employed in an "inner" (first-person) and "outer" (third-person) version: It can be used to test one's own enlightenment, or the lack thereof, based on intuitive inner reflection. It can also be used to test the enlightenment, or the lack thereof, of other enlightened or "enlightened" ones ("enlightened" enclosed in inverted commas refers to claims of enlightenment that do not fulfil the ET criteria on enlightenment), based on intuitive outer observation.

The *inner* ET version may be formulated as follows:

If you think you are enlightened, sit down in a quiet moment, for example, at the begin or end of a meditation pe-

riod. Ask yourself with serious reflection: "Is there still something I want?" — If your answer is "Yes", you are not enlightened. If your answer is "No", more scrutiny and reflection is necessary, such as: Is this "No" connected to penetrating insight into the characteristics of things? Is it connected to clear understanding of the mental and physical phenomena of being and their interaction? Is it connected to wholesome mental qualities such as generosity, compassion, and wisdom? Is it non-temporary, but lasting? There is no analytical or discursive way to find out if you are enlightened. If you are enlightened a discursive "proof" will be of no importance.

Here is an example of an answer an "enlightened" one may give, who tries to cheat the ET but fails: "I do not want anything, but first I want to have my 'enlightenment' proved by fMRI and then I want to write a New York Times Best Seller about my 'enlightenment'." The ET does not permit any ifs or buts. There is no half-hearted materialist or consumerist "enlightenment" in the realm of the ET. One has, or has not, entirely overcome "wanting". "Wanting" refers to "craving" for (and in) life and for continuous existence (Pali *taṇhā*, "craving" – as *vibhava-taṇhā* it also refers to "the craving for non-existence [or annihilation]"). *Taṇhā* is "the source of suffering" (*dukkha-samudaya* – the second of the four noble truths in Buddhism).

Besides its practical usefulness, the ET – referring to the "enlightened" one above who tries to cheat it but fails – also points to a serious epistemological problem. It is logically impossible to prove something unconditioned, such as enlightenment, with something conditioned, such as Western quantitative scientific means.

If enlightenment is “proved” by materialist means, such as physiological changes that can be captured with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), it is transformed into something conditioned. Hence, it necessarily becomes unenlightened. fMRI can show, with some degree of certainty, changes in the brain that occur because of long-time meditation. If such changes mean that someone is enlightened or not, can never be “proved” with any degree of certainty.

One then may ask if there can be any way of “proving” enlightenment from “outside”. Can there be an outer ET version? Ultimately, there can be no outer proof of enlightenment. It is an entirely subjective, inner experience beyond conditioned instruments (including language) that may be employed to capture it. Enlightenment (the better translation of *bodhi* is “awakening”) is a concept that points to the experience of an ultimate (and unconditioned) reality – *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*). The concept itself that designates this experience (such as Pali *bodhi*, or English “enlightenment” or “awakening”; a so-called “name concept”, Pali *nāma-paññatti*), is conditioned and relative (i.e., unenlightened). However, considering the descriptions in the Buddhist literature, it, indeed, may be possible to get clarity about another’s enlightenment, or the lack thereof, based on one’s felt sense and on careful intuitive observation of the other’s behaviour. The protagonist of this literature (I refer to the Pali canon) – the enlightened one (the Buddha) – has the capacity to “see” others’ enlightenment, or the lack thereof, precisely because, according to this literature and as his name suggests, he himself is fully awakened. He also urges his audience intuitively and critically to test spiritual teachers’ behaviour — hence, also their enlightenment, or the lack thereof. Besides many other things the Buddha teaches a

critical psychological anthropological participant observation. Intuitive psychological dimensions are crucial for the practical understanding of Buddhist psychology (BP) and mindfulness. Indeed, BP and mindfulness only “work” if one can train one’s mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*) intuitively to “see” beyond (one’s own and all) conditioned concepts. The full version of the outer ET I suggest here can be found in the *Caṅkī-sutta* (MN II 164–177; concerning the [or an] outer ET version see the section on the “understanding of truth” [*saccānubodha*], 171,26–173,28).

Here is the condensed version of the *outer* ET:

Then a householder or householder’s son [“householder” (*gahapati*) refers to a lay person, as opposed to a monastic] goes to him [a monk] and investigates him in regard to three kinds of states [*dharmas*]: in regard to *states based on greed, hate, or delusion*: “Are there in this venerable one [the monk investigated] any states based on greed, hate, or delusion such that, with his mind obsessed by those states, while not knowing he might say, ‘I know’, or while not seeing he might say, ‘I see’, or he might urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering for a long time?” As he investigates him he comes to know: “There are no such states based on greed, ... hate, ... [or] delusion in this venerable one. The bodily behaviour and the verbal behaviour of this venerable one are not those of one affected by [greed, hate, or] delusion. The doctrine [*dhamma*] that this venerable one teaches is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.

This doctrine cannot easily be taught by someone affected by [greed, hate, or] delusion.’ (MN II 171–173; trans. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2005, from the Pali, slightly modified, emphasis added)

Buddhist mindfulness (*satī*) is a psychological ethical practice related to the transformation of “wanting” into “non-wanting” (cf. the description on *taṇhā* above). The transformation of “wanting” into “non-wanting” refers to the transformation of greed or craving (*lobha*) into non-greed or generosity (*alobha*, *cāga* or *dāna*), hate or rejecting (*dosa*) into compassion or friendliness (*adosa* or *mettā*), and delusion (*moha*) into non-delusion or wisdom (*amoha* or *paññā*). Delusion is the third “unwholesome root” (*akusala mūla*), besides greed and hate. It refers to “seeing” things in a way they are not: namely, permanent (*nicca*), (“naïvely”) pleasant or happy (*sukha*), and with an inherent lasting self (*attan*). Wisdom refers to the opposite: One is aware that all conditioned things are impermanent (*anicca*), and therefore unsatisfactory or suffering (*dukkha*), and without an inherent lasting self (*anattā*) but dependent on causation. In an enlightened one the transformation of these three unwholesome roots (greed, hate, and delusion) into their opposites (generosity, compassion, and wisdom) is complete and lasting.

What may be the best way of addressing the idea of enlightenment today? Another Indian religious system, Jainism, whose historical roots can be traced before the Buddha’s time (Jains, referred to as *nigaṇṭhas* [“freed from bonds”], and their leader, Mahāvīra, referred to as Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, are often mentioned in the Pali canon), has “solved” the “problem” of enlightenment (Sanskrit *mokṣa*) pragmatically. According to traditional Jaina doctrine the last one who attained enlightenment was Jambū, a disciple of Mahāvīra’s disciple Indrab-

hūti Gautama. Enlightenment cannot be attained in the present era of this earth. This has “prevented” Jainism from the necessity to prove attainments that are considered to accompany (or constitute) enlightenment, such as, in the case of Jainism, full omniscience (which still cannot be captured by fMRI). Given today’s Western (and Eastern) commodification of “enlightenment” and of practices, such as mindfulness, that may lead to enlightenment, one may wish that also from the Buddhist perspective the possibility of attaining enlightenment (Pali *bodhi*) is rejected altogether. However, Jaina practice and metaphysics differ from the Buddha’s psychological ethical approach to liberation. The main Buddhist doctrine, the four noble truths, depends on the possibility of overcoming suffering entirely. Striving for awakening is a critical part of all Indian religious systems that are based on yogic practices, such as the systems of Buddhism and Jainism. From the perspective of various Buddhist schools awakening can also be attained in the present era.

The ET points to questions mindfulness practitioners may encounter at some point: Does one want to use “mindfulness” to flourish uncritically within conditioning — that is, in the world (i.e., in the realm of suffering)? Does one want to understand conditioning and the world (i.e., suffering) and in this way and with the help of mindfulness aim towards overcoming suffering? The logic of Western materialism and consumerism implies that one has to agree with the former question. If one aims towards reaching genuine mental health, well-being, and happiness in the sense of BP and mindfulness, one will have to agree with the latter question, which points to the direct way to “the end of suffering” (*dukkha-nirodha* – the third noble truth in Buddhism). It may be added that going the latter way does not mean not

to flourish in the world. However, unlike in Western materialism and consumerism and the structures and systems underpinning and creating them, flourishing has a very different meaning from the perspective of BP and mindfulness: namely, to embody, as best as one can, in one's conditioned world one's inner transformation of unwholesome states (greed, hate, and delusion) into their opposites (generosity, compassion, and wisdom). This transformation is accompanied by an understanding of one's suffering, one's conditioning, and one's world, which, ultimately, may lead to the end of one's suffering, one's conditioning, and one's world – that is, awakening.

Abbreviation

References to volume and pages [and lines] of the Pali Text Society ed.

MN – *Majjhima-nikāya*

Reference

Ñāṇamoli, B., & Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2005). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Wisdom in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Author:

Univ.-Lektor Mag.phil. Dr.phil. Gerald Virtbauer,
EuroDipPsyRel
Department for Psychotherapy Science,
Sigmund Freud University Vienna

gerald.virtbauer@sfu.ac.at

www.geraldvirtbauer.org